



# ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

University assessment practices in a time of disruption and uncertainty:  
a starting point for further discussion



## Introductory comments

The purpose of this document is to provide a set of broad definitions and a few guidelines that may assist you in making decisions about assessing your students in the coming months. It is not intended as a comprehensive overview but rather as a broad-based guide and starting point for further discussion during the coming weeks.

It is a given that different modules will need different strategies but there are nevertheless some common practices that can inform us all. In my view, in this very fluid context, the key, intersecting questions for us are

- What do I **most** want my students to learn?
- Is **continuous assessment (CA) feasible for my module** and, if so, what are the implications of this for online learning?
- How do I need to **adapt** my teaching to achieve that?
- Which of my module learning outcomes have already been met?
- Do some learning outcomes need to be modified and if so, how?
- What are the best ways of ensuring that all my students meet the outcomes required?
- How do I identify difficulties students may have and assess the progress they are making?

And beyond this, the crucial questions in this context are

- What does a three-tier assessment model mean in the context of my module?
- How do I move from a focused, mark orientated way of assessing to a broader brush-stroke model?
- How do I know when a student has not met outcomes, has met the outcomes and has exceeded expectations?

### Please note:



- **If at all possible, we are all being requested to opt for CA.** If you can do this, you will need to apply through your department/faculty to make the change.
- Now more than ever, it is crucially important for us to communicate frequently with our students and, if necessary, to make further adjustments to our teaching and assessment practices based on their feedback.

## Types of assessment practice

There are two broad types of assessment practice (formative and summative) and a third (continuous) which is a combination of both but without a formal exam. There are numerous variations within each of these all of which are valuable, but which are not of immediate concern now.

## Formative assessment

This can be understood as assessing “as you go along” as it **occurs throughout** a module. The benefits of this type of assessment are that it

- provides opportunities for regular assessment tasks which may include the analysis of case studies, class presentations, quizzes, short tests, brief or extended essays, reports and multiple-choice questions.
- allows for a greater variety of assessment tasks
- it is possible to “check in” often, identify problem areas as the course progresses and to adjust teaching accordingly in order to meet students’ needs.
- Can include very short assessment activities which are marked relatively quickly and so provide almost immediate feedback for students

## Summative assessment

Summative assessment evaluates student learning, knowledge, proficiency, or success at the conclusion of a module or programme. It is most frequently done via formal exams, which include short and long essay questions, case study analyses and multiple-choice questions. These are most often held in large venues on campus but may also be conducted online. They can also be open book exams.

Usually students are assessed via both formative and summative assessment with more importance placed on the summative assessment at the end. In unusual circumstances, they are assessed using summative assessment only. However, this is not optimal and removes all possibility of ongoing checking of understanding and mid-stream intervention. The key benefit of summative assessment is that

- it provides students with the opportunity to show their ability to **integrate all the knowledge** gained during the module and to apply that knowledge in a range of different contexts. This, of course, is dependent on the care and skill with which the exam is set.

## Continuous assessment

Continuous assessment is when students are formatively assessed **throughout the course with no traditional summative examination**. Within this model, most often the summative assessment takes place through **the examination of a portfolio** which is a collection of a range of work completed and assessed during the course. Portfolios can consist of various media (such as images, text documents, short video and/or audio clips) and submitted either in hard copy or as an electronic assignment on the LMS. The value of continuous assessment is that it

- avoids an over-emphasis on the end-of-course exam
- alleviates the stress of the formal exam which many students find difficult
- emphasises low-stake tasks at the beginning of a module

- provides a variety of assessment options
- allows students to work at their own pace if necessary
- encourages improvement over time
- offers a greater chance of success

## Good assessment practice and implications for online teaching: some guiding principles

There are numerous ways in which we can assess our students but the principles in Table 1 can serve as a baseline from which to build.

| Assessment principle                                                                                                                | Implications for online teaching                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
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| Assessment tasks should be <b>aligned</b> with the learning outcomes.                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revised <b>assessments must be aligned with learning outcomes.</b></li> <li>• Clearly <b>explain any changes</b> in assessment to the students</li> <li>• Consider ways in which you might be able to <b>reduce the assessment load.</b></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Where possible, assessments should be <b>authentic</b> and based on real world issues and topics which are linked to the workplace. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design assessment tasks which need to be <b>applied to the real world</b> and are relevant to the students' context.</li> <li>• Tasks need to <b>minimise recall</b> which could contribute to plagiarism</li> <li>• Tasks should <b>encourage students' self-reflection</b>, original thinking</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Make sure that the <b>purpose</b> of all assessments is clearly communicated to students.                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly <b>communicate all changes</b> in assessment to students</li> <li>• Provide students with <b>a clear plan</b> of how the revised teaching, learning and assessment are connected to and contribute to the programme.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Devise short, <b>varied assessments</b> throughout the course to enable you and the students to assess their progress.              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A <b>variety of assessment methods</b> can be used, including case studies, short answer questions and <b>short</b> tests.</li> <li>• Offer <b>smaller, more regular opportunities</b> to determine insight into and application of the content.</li> <li>• Students should also have opportunities to review their own performance and <b>assess their learning</b> using self-tests, journaling or short quizzes that contain built-in feedback. This will <b>help students to take responsibility</b> for their own learning and develop them as independent learners.</li> </ul> |

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| <p>Provide <b>clear criteria</b> for all assessment tasks.</p>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessments and assignments should have <b>clear, detailed instructions</b>, including date and time of submission, length of the document and mark allocation.</li> <li>• Supply a <b>rubric with clear evaluation criteria</b> that indicate aspects to be assessed and mark allocation.</li> <li>• Offer <b>open and supportive communication</b> which encourages students to discuss any difficulties they may have.</li> <li>• Take account of the circumstances of the students and <b>allow for flexibility</b> within reasonable limits as well as a chance to catch up with assessments if necessary.</li> </ul>                                                |
| <p>Assessments <b>must be fair</b> and should not disadvantage any groups of students.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A <b>quick, short, low stake assessment at the beginning</b> of the module provides insight into student well-being, current knowledge and access to resources.</li> <li>• Assessment tasks must <b>consider students' access</b> to online and other resources. Be clear on what they would need to complete a task.</li> <li>• <b>Do not over-assess.</b> Remember that students may well be engaged with four online modules.</li> <li>• As far as possible, <b>keep things simple.</b> The introduction of new technology is not advisable in these circumstances.</li> <li>• For any group projects/assessments, <b>ensure that students can connect.</b></li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Balance formative and summative assessment.</b></p>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Avoid 'high-stake' summative assessments,</b> especially at the beginning.</li> <li>• <b>Divide bigger tasks or tests into a series of smaller activities</b> which are easier for students to complete on a small device and easier to mark.</li> <li>• Dividing larger assignments into smaller sections will <b>boost students' confidence</b> in working in this new environment without academically prejudicing them unnecessarily.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to <b>close the gap</b> between current and desired performance.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                 |

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| <p>Give students <b>detailed, actionable feedback.</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When feedback is <b>provided soon after an assessment</b> it will be more meaningful and important to students.</li> <li>• Feedback and guidance <b>should be constructive</b> and help students to improve.</li> <li>• Feedback should be focussed on <b>helping students to understand</b> whether they have/have not met the criteria for the assessment.</li> <li>• Feedback should <b>focus on content</b> as well as a <b>discipline's language and style of argument.</b></li> <li>• Well-structured feedback will assist students in learning to make judgements on their own performance.</li> <li>• Consider allowing <b>multiple submission attempts</b> as this serves a developmental purpose.</li> <li>• Feedback can be given directly on written assessments in a text format or as a voice note.</li> <li>• <b>Feedback from students provides information</b> to lecturers on how to change future teaching and assessments, if required.</li> </ul> |
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Table 1: UJ Assessment Guidelines for Learning at a Distance (Adapted from University of Johannesburg, 2020).

I hope this document serves as a useful guide going forward and I look forward to many conversations and further refinements in the months to come.

#### Useful resources

Phil Race's website (<https://phil-race.co.uk/2020/02/a-draft-table-assessment-feedback-and-contract-cheating-in-perspective/>) has a useful table to help you consider the pros and cons of various forms of assessments.

UKZN provides a series of links to a range of south African universities

<http://utlo.ukzn.ac.za/utop/Ouresources.aspx>

The Centre for Teaching and Learning in Louisville, KY, USA has 5 tips for designing online assessments and good arguments for developing authentic assignments Creative Methods of Assessment in Online Learning Authentic assessment in the online classroom assessments.

<https://ctl.wiley.com/creative-methods-of-assessment-in-online-learning/>

<https://ctl.wiley.com/authentic-assessment-in-the-online-classroom/>